

Preservation: A Solo Ceramics Show

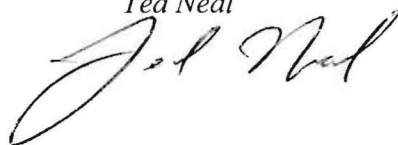
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ted Neal", written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

For centuries ceramic artists have been expressing themselves through both practical and artistic pottery. Handling a piece of ceramic, whether it was a functional object or an abstract sculpture, told the viewer something about the artist's energy and process. This information is preserved in the art work. The piece then becomes a channel through which viewer and artist are irrevocably connected. Through the advent of modern machinery, the factory-production of functional ceramic items has completely removed the ability of ceramics to serve as a channel of connection between artist and viewer, ceramic items become cold and inhospitable. What has the potential to be a rich, revealing art form all too often sinks to the level of "useful" and overlooked dishware. Not a hint of the artist is revealed, no history is preserved. As a ceramic artist, I have carefully considered the story I want my pottery to tell. The events, emotion and information I hope to preserve through my artwork is of great importance to me. Through irregularity and unpretentious forms, viewers will see and feel first-hand evidence of my process. My pieces are created from a variety of clay bodies - porcelain, stoneware, and low-fire red clay - with a variety of firing methods - reduction gas, low-temperature electric, wood, reduction cooled wood, and raku. My subject matter differs as wildly as my process. In one set of pieces I chose to focus on natural and man-made disasters. I chose this theme to highlight the importance of human awareness: Which of our actions causes the events? What can we do to heighten preparedness, attempting to preserve that which gives us life and should be of utmost importance - the natural world? The purpose of using a variety of styles and processes is to emphasize the personality and natural earthiness of ceramic art - after all, humans and pottery have something in common. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* Dirt is the substance from which all life was formed and to which all life returns; ceramics thus hold an exalted place next to living beings. I have also infused personal information about myself and my thoughts into my pieces. The title for my senior project is *Preservation*. It is my hope that as you view the way I have shaped my pieces, you will have an intimate understanding of what has shaped *me* as an artist. I extend myself to you, the viewer, through my work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my professor Ted Neal for advising me through this project. His help served to focus my frequently flighty attention to the task at hand. Without his connections, experience and advice through the past years, especially this past semester, I would not have been able to complete my show.

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Author's Statement

I believe that the significance of my works is twofold: First, by preserving my thought in tangible form viewers are encouraged to decode the information and compare it to their own ideas. I will use the term "Memory" to refer to what is bound up inside of every individual - thoughts, ideas, desires, and remembrances. Memory is the thread that connects society through a national subconscious. At a time when forward-thinking is praised and innovative achievements are considered the pinnacle of success, our collective memory has the potential to become atrophied through lack of use. In order to reverse this unfortunate process, we must never lose sight of our innermost ideas and memories. My pieces are an expression of thoughts that have shaped me into what I am today; in physical form, they are preserved for all time. Memory must be not only be recalled but cultivated and nurtured. Knowing the past of an individual is the only way to understand the present individual, and to look into their future. Virginia Woolf once said, "Each has his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart and his friends can only read the title." My pieces are the leaves of a book that I know by heart, opened to the viewer so that we may better understand each other. I do not hide behind my work but view it as a catharsis, a way to cleanse my subconscious.

Second, I believe that as an artist I differ from the standard. Electronic media and social networking were pioneered during my generation with indomitable success. The ability of the "electronic age" to so thoroughly capture an audience's attention and focus it so wholly upon the present is unfathomable. The repercussions of such a dramatic shift in public awareness have yet to be observed. It is my conviction that if we as human beings lose sight of the past and fail to preserve our collective Memory, our very foundation is ignored and thus rendered impotent. Consider my point: rich traditions have been replaced by the insatiable thirst to have things *now*, and to have the best. Mealtimes that were once a place of convention and etiquette with tablecloths, matching silverware, and family conversation have become a litany of fast food restaurants and prepared foods, disposable dishware and the television. Although convenience has its place in a fast-paced world, when the bonds of family that were previously strengthened through meals together become lax and careless, the very fiber of society shifts. Are these societal shifts for the better, preparing individuals for life in the modern world? Perhaps, yet it is my

stance that we have much to learn from the past. The “new and improved” ways to store and preserve information are two-dimensional (or intangible altogether!)—the Internet, e-mail, blogs. These cannot compare to the experience of picking up, holding, and *exploring* a three-dimensional piece of ceramic art. The concept behind the piece is not spelled out; as a viewer you have to search for it, finding meaning in the minute details. The encounter becomes a meditation, a journey of the mind, a searching for what has been preserved by the object.

As I prepared pieces for my show, I had the pleasure to meet a visiting artist, Dick Lehman, a prominent ceramicist from Goshen, Indiana. He visited our studio for a few days, providing demonstrations of his well-known art works. He also held a question and answer session on his last day, during which asked how he personally deals with the concepts of originality and appropriation in his art. In response, he told us of a conversation with a Japanese master of the ceramic arts during which he had asked the same question. The Japanese artist’s response was simple. Do not *borrow* forms and ideas from artists - rather *steal* them. For in borrowing, you are simply using something that belongs to someone else. When you steal a form or concept, you make it your own. This story made an impression on me. I was struggling with balancing ideas that I enjoyed and had discovered during my research with original concepts and techniques. Once I realized that I could combine everything I loved into my own unique pieces without fear of being accused of copying, a whole new world opened to me. The pieces in my *Preservation* show therefore have many influences.

I consider the Japanese-American ceramicist Ayumie Horie to be the most influential on my own art. Her pieces hold a heady combination of technical detail and subject matter that I sought to imitate. Horie uses primarily low-fire red clay, covered in white and colored slips and clear and colored glazes, and she focuses her subject matter on political awareness. I created a body of work along the same vein, with low-fire red clay and white and colored slips and clear and colored glazes. My forms were my own, the recipes for slips were my own, the recipes for glazes were my own, the subject matter was my own - the pieces I created were unique in every way. Horie’s pieces simply gave me a direction to take my own work. I also took the pieces a few steps further, adding decals and enamels to my pieces.

I was also influenced by the work of artist Andy Warhol. After Warhol's brush with death he entered back into the art world with many morbid pieces. His subject matter was tense - riots, car accidents and *vanitas* images. His works were full of death, a concept very close to the artist himself; yet he shockingly chose to portray these images in bright colors. The contrast between morbid subject matter and bright cheerful colors was perhaps his way of coming to terms with his own mortality. Death specters like skulls do not seem as foreboding when printed in bright pink. I adorned my own images of tornadoes, hurricanes, and oil spills in bright, cheerful yellows and blues. Death exists, yet we do not choose to fear it.

Last summer I took a class on artists of the twentieth century. One of my favorite artists from the entire period is Keith Haring, the inventor of Neo-Pop in the 1980s. Haring began his art career as a graffiti artist in the subway stations of New York City. The 1980s were a time of great political uncertainty; nuclear war seemed imminent and Haring picked up on this social mood in his earliest works. His symbol of the "radiant child" became iconic of this period of Neo-Pop. A few of Keith Haring's prints are in Bracken Library today. His art focused on political awareness, a concept I sought to imitate, albeit subtly. More than any other, my 15-piece tea set is influenced by Haring's approach. Decals and enamels depict birds sitting on branches outside of windows that glow yellow with a brilliant burst of light formed with yellow enamel. The burst of light refers to the threat of nuclear war, something that we are still familiar with so many years after Haring's art. The bird I chose to represent on these pieces is the chickadee, ironically a symbol of cheerfulness and optimism.

My pieces fall into three categories: atmospheric firing, focus on form, and focus on subject matter. I will discuss the processes and techniques behind my pieces as they fit into these categories. First, I will discuss the pieces that underwent an atmospheric firing. This refers to the pieces that were fired in both regular and reduction wood kilns and the raku kiln. The greatest difficulty with ceramics as an art form is that no matter how closely you monitor the form and surface treatment of a piece, and how carefully you choose the glaze and firing method, you still give up some control to the process through firing. It is mind-wracking! I focused on creating a body of work for a variety of finishing processes, knowing that I should at least end up with a few successful pieces out of the

whole lot. Every piece is either thrown on a wheel or a combination of wheel throwing a slab building. I kept a detailed sketchbook of forms and ideas over the entire semester, and looked to it for ideas every time I sat down at my wheel. I then trimmed, smoothed, and finished the pieces, and allowed each to reach “bone dry” - a ceramic piece’s most fragile state. Once the pieces were bone dry, I loaded them into a bisque kiln - an electric kiln - programmed to fire to 1800 degrees in a series of steps. This preliminary firing prepared the pieces for glazes and slips. I chose “liner glazes” for the pieces going into the regular wood firing, glazes that smooth the clay’s natural rough state, leaving the pieces ready for everyday use. I specifically chose slips to interact with the flame and ash in the kiln, and sprayed them lightly over the exterior of the pieces.

The process of wood firing is simple yet time consuming. In a nutshell, the pieces are loaded into the kiln, the door is bricked up, and a fire begins at one end. In a “train” wood kiln, the fire is at one end of a long kiln and the draft from the chimney on the other end pulls the heat through the middle where pieces are carefully stacked. The licking of the flame and swirling of ash creates an incredibly interesting surface on the pieces in the kiln. The reduction cool wood fire is similar, except that once the wood kiln reached the desired temperature, instead of banking the fire and walking away, the holes are plugged in the kiln and the flue is nearly closed. As the fire is starved of oxygen, wood is continually added as the kiln cools, creating a reducing atmosphere. The reduction cooling atmosphere created a darker surface on the pieces.

The final type of atmospheric firing I used was raku firing, which had its origins in ancient Japan. I used special raku glazes over bisque-fired pieces, and loaded them into a small kiln. Once they reached the appropriate temperature, I opened the kiln and used long metal tongs to grab the red-hot ceramics pieces, plunging them into a metal trash can full of sawdust. The pieces were so hot that the sawdust combusted, yet I continued to layer pieces in the can and shovel sawdust on top. Once the barrel was full the lid I put the lid on firmly, starving the fire of oxygen and thus putting it out. The pieces sat in the barrel for forty-five minutes to an hour, and I then removed them with the same tongs and set them to cool. I also plunged pieces into cold water to speed the cooling process. Needless to say, this was my favorite atmospheric firing! Who can resist a garbage can

spewing flame several feet into the air? The raku firing process created a crackling, metallic effect on the pieces.

A number of my pieces focused on form, by which I mean that they were neither fired in an atmospheric kiln nor endowed with surface subject matter. I am mainly referring to my porcelain pieces, as well as a single stoneware vase. I enjoyed working with porcelain as the clay is smoother than regular stoneware. The porcelain forced me to spend a great deal of time perfecting my wheel throwing technique because the clay is finer and more delicate, meaning that it more easily collapses with the wrong move. It was also easier to throw thinner “walls” with porcelain. As I grew more confident I tried my hand at “faceting” a few pieces. I threw the piece as a straight cylinder and then used a cheese slicer to remove slices of clay at regular intervals. As long as I did not inadvertently slice through the entire side of the piece (which happened several times) I could then “open” the piece - applying pressure on the inside as the wheel turned, widening the pieces into cups or tea bowls with uniquely straight, geometric sides. After the bisque firing I chose a pale blue celadon glaze for the pieces. I strained the glaze twice through a 60-mesh strainer to remove the coarse iron flecks from the glaze; by doing so, I ensured that my glaze would be flawless over the white porcelain. The amount of care and detail that went into the throwing and glazing of these pieces made me realize that they were successful as they were, and that no additional glazes, decals or enamels were necessary to add to their beauty.

Finally, several of my pieces focused on subject matter, the importance of preserving information and gaining social awareness of issues. These pieces began like the others, wheel thrown and finished, only these were made out of low-fire red clay. My plates were rolled out as slabs and pressed over plaster molds. After they firmed up sufficiently I carefully pried them loose and let them dry further before adding slips. Once all of my red clay pieces were leather hard (dry enough to pick up, but not dry all the way through) I used a combination of dipping and pouring to cover them in both white and yellow slips that I mixed from modified recipes. Once the slips had firmed up I used sharp tools to create *sgraffito*, carving through the slips to reveal the red clay beneath. After adding a few more colored slips, I bisque fired the pieces. Next, I dipped them into a clear glaze and painted blue and yellow glazes on top. I then glaze fired the

pieces in an electric kiln to cone 08, around 1800 degrees. After removing the pieces from the glaze kiln, I added decals and enamels. The decals were images I found on the internet and then printed on a special paper in a laser printer. The iron in the toner fires to a sepia color, leaving the image imprinted on the ceramic piece. The enamels I thinned with turpentine and painted onto the glazed pieces with a paintbrush. I then fired the pieces to a cone 017, around 1300 degrees. This temperature was high enough to bond the decals and enamels to the pieces, but not so high as to start “moving” the glazes again. The entire process to create these pieces took three firings and multiple surface treatment steps. I chose this complicated approach intentionally to challenge myself as an artist. Everything that could possibly go wrong at each step did! My glazes bubbled and melted off, my decals failed to adhere completely, and I was left cleaning glaze residue off of several kiln shelves. Nevertheless, the process was entirely educational and left me with a few pieces that I was comfortable displaying at my show. If I had two entire years devoted entirely to this creation process I would have the time and experience to master it. Yet even then, as I stated earlier, no matter how many tests are run and modifications are used, you can never really be sure of what will come out of the kiln! That is why it is so rewarding when something amazing and unexpected happens and a brilliant piece emerges.

Description of Pieces in my Show divided into three categories

Atmospheric Pieces:



This piece is one of my favorites. It is thrown and altered stoneware. It is part of my "collapsing" series of two bowls and three teabowls. While on the wheel I introduced "fault lines" into the pieces, pressing down until it buckled into itself. The piece has a purple haze liner glaze and a very flashing slip on the exterior. It was fired in a regular wood firing.



This piece is part of my collapsing series as well. You can see the purple haze liner glaze better in this picture. The concept for this series is the fact that being fat was a sign of wealth in 19th century Africa. The undulating forms of my pieces are meant to mirror the undulating forms of ancient Africans, a commentary on the world hunger crisis of today.



This casserole dish is stoneware with a tenmoku (rich black) liner glaze and a very flashing slip exterior. It was wheel thrown and altered, a slab bottom and lid added after. It was fired in a regular wood kiln. I love the lemon yellow and apricot orange color variations the wood fire created on the surface.

It is part of a "Meoto" set with the casserole below- a husband and wife set where the pieces are fairly identical yet one is slightly larger than the other.



This casserole dish is stoneware with a tenmoku (rich black) liner glaze and a very flashing slip exterior. It was wheel thrown and altered, a slab bottom and lid added after. It was fired in a wood kiln with reduction cooling. You can see the color difference between this casserole and the previous one, the reduction cool created a darker, more intense surface. It is part of a "Meoto" set with the casserole below- a husband and wife set where the pieces are fairly identical yet one is slightly larger than the other.



These espresso cups are thrown and faceted stoneware. After faceting the surfaces were treated with sodium silicate, a drying agent. After the sodium silicate hardened, when the pieces were opened, tiny cracks formed across the surfaces. They were then bisque fired, treated with a slip rich in laterite (iron), and fired in a wood fire with reduction cool.



These teabowls have the same throwing and surface treatment as the espresso cups above. They are a set of "Meoto Yunomi"- Japanese for a husband and wife teabowl set. The teabowls are fairly identical in handling, yet one is slightly larger than the other. I love the concept of Meoto ceramics.



Dick Lehman, a visiting artist from Spring Semester, directly inspired this piece. He first showed me how to use the sodium silicate that creates the surface cracks and ripples on the stoneware. He also demonstrated several small vase forms. This piece is thrown and altered stoneware, the surface treated with sodium silicate before bisque firing. The piece was then treated with a laterite slip and fired in a wood kiln with reduction cool.



This vase is also Dick Lehman inspired, like the one above. It has the same surface treatment yet is also treated to a tenmoku (rich black) liner glaze. This piece was really hammered with ash in the kiln firing, chunks of it even adhered to the surface. I think it looks like the underside of a rock that has been sitting in a field for years- teeming with information and organic life.

Focus on Form pieces:



These pieces are thrown and faceted porcelain. They are so thinly thrown that when you lift the teabowl up to the light it is translucent. Originally the set contained two espresso cups and two teabowls. The faceting required a great deal of patience and I accidentally sliced through the side of one of my missing pieces, and the second missing piece was punctured by tongs as I was dipping it into the glaze. That is an indication of how delicate the pieces are. The celadon glaze was strained twice to remove any coarse iron, creating a smooth and translucent pale blue surface



This pitcher and mug set is similar to the set above in clay body and glaze techniques. The porcelain was thrown and trimmed and handles added. Before the pieces were bisque fired I applied a white slip (liquid clay) to the pieces in dots. I applied the dots in geometric patterns. You can see the detail up close on the mug on the right. Each pattern was different. I was especially interested to see how the glaze moved on top of the raised dots. It did exactly what I wanted- smoothing and glazing the dots but not obscuring them completely. When you pick the pieces up you can run your fingers over the slips dots and feel them like Braille.

Focus on Subject Matter Pieces:



This set I call my “Infinity Set.” I used several different surface treatment techniques on this set, some of which worked better than others. It prominently features the infinity symbol. I started with low-fire red clay. After the pieces were thrown and trimmed and handles added, I carved geometric patterns on the exterior of each piece. This process is called *mishima*. I then layered on a white slip. After the slip was dry to the touch, I took shellac and used a paintbrush to paint on the infinity symbols and dots. After the shellac dried I washed off the white slip, leaving the *mishima* lines filled with white slip. Also, the shellac did not wash off of where I painted the shellac. The pieces were then bisque fired, and the shellac burned off, leaving behind the exposed slip. I finished them by glazing with both clear and blue glazes.



This set I called “Lifecycle of your meal.” I started with low-fire red clay. The pieces were then dipped in white and yellow slips. After the slips dried I carved through using the *sgraffito* technique. After the pieces were bisque fired I glazed them in clear glaze with splashes of blue glaze in the interiors. After the glaze fire I painted on colored enamels and applied decals and fired again to a cone 017. I especially love the way the enamels went on like watercolors. The colors are so beautiful! My decals are humorous- the Colonel of Kentucky Fried Chicken. The beauty of a life cycle is not quite so beautiful when you realize what the end result is to be.



This plate begins my disaster series titled, "If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911." It is slab-rolled low-fire red clay pressed into a plaster mold. After pouring white and yellow slips over top, I used *sgraffito* to depict a stylized tornado. It is in memory of all the tornado victims there have been this spring. Clear and colored glazes were applied, and then enamels and decals. The Hamsa Hand featured prominently on each piece symbolizes a plea for protection from natural disasters.



This piece depicts a tidal wave, only fitting after the tragedy that struck Japan this year.



This piece is a highly stylized hurricane. Hurricane awareness has increased since Katrina but hurricanes are still one of the most unpredictable and deadly natural disasters.



This piece depicts a mudslide using the same processes and techniques as before.



This serving bowl is larger than the four plates. I chose to *sgraffito* an oil spill victim—an image that I found online of a bird covered in oil trying in vain to rid himself of the stickiness. I titled this piece “A Drop of Dawn.” I used the same techniques as on the plates, the only difference being that this is not a natural disaster, but a man-made one. Oil spills can be prevented, but man’s greed prevents proper safety measures from being carried out. The majority of victims have no voice of their own to protest.



These images are from a 15-piece tea set, including teapot, creamer, four tumblers, four saucers, four dessert plates, and a serving tray. They are thrown stoneware with white slip painted on as the windowpanes. After bisque-firing they were glazed in blue celadon (like my porcelain pieces). Notice the difference between stoneware and porcelain with the same glaze! After glaze firing I added the chickadee decals and painted on enamels in the Japanese brush painting style for tree branches, blossoms, and the brilliant yellow indicating a nuclear explosion in the distance.